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OSJ is a CT-based civil rights organization. We support creating safer communities through rational, evidence-based criminal justice reform and healing through restorative justice.

Oppose HB 6572 – AN ACT CONCERNING THE CREATION OF A STATE POLICE STING OPERATIONS UNIT TO ADDRESS ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE OF MINORS.

Sen. Maher, Rep. Linehan, Sen. Seminara, Rep. Dauphinais, and distinguished Members of the Committee on Children,

My name is Cindy Prizio, and I am Executive Director of One Standard of Justice, and I am against HB6572, which seeks to create a police sting operations unit. While OSJ supports prevention of online child sexual abuse, this bill will not accomplish that goal and will create tremendous harm. Simply put, well-intentioned but misguided people create bad policy. Across the nation, experts, legislatures, and law enforcement are realizing that the data is incomplete, there have been few studies done showing the benefits of sting operations, but we know their high costs. The legislature would do better to go back to the workgroup to study the issue and find effective, evidence-based polices rather than waste precious resources.

There are numerous issues with the bill. To begin with, much of the terminology in the bill is ill-defined and without appropriate safeguards, encouraging vigilantism and catching people who are not a threat. Most of the people targeted by these sting operations have had no other offenses past or present and would not otherwise have broken the law but for the sting operation.

“An analysis of court records in Washington State stings, as well as interviews with police and prosecutors, reveals that most of the men arrested have no felony record. A strong predictor of predatory behavior is an obsession with child pornography, but at the time of their arrest, according to the State Patrol, 89 percent have none in their possession and 92 percent have no history of violent crime.”

Source: <https://narsol.org/2020/08/police-sex-offender-entrapment-stings-produce-convictions-without-victims/>

Police sting operations raise a number of complex issues that the bill doesn't even attempt to address, and will result in more harms than benefits. It will also waste taxpayer money when the funds could be much better spent on education and prevention - teaching our children to protect themselves.

“Jean Bruggeman, executive director of Freedom Network USA, which describes itself as the country's largest advocacy network focused on preventing human trafficking, says there's been no evaluation of whether proactive stings are effective in preventing abuse. According to Bruggeman, one way to tell whether the people being arrested are actually

dangerous is if, at the time of arrest, police find evidence that the accused committed other crimes against children. If they fail to, it's 'highly problematic,' said Bruggeman. It means those arrested may not have had criminal intent and that these operations are taking time and money away from cases involving actual kids, she says."

"... operations that target people who don't appear to be actively looking for sex with minors may actually drain resources from interventions that could rescue real victims, say advocates and experts."

Source: <https://theappeal.org/online-child-sex-stings-protect-act/>

Sting operations require that the police incorporate deception into their work, which given recent events in Memphis seems tone deaf. In order to restore confidence in law enforcement, Connecticut needs to end all deceptive practices - it creates an adversarial relationship between the police and public, and presents a slippery slope for officers who are encouraged to lie if it leads to an arrest.

"The government verges too close to tyranny when it sends its agents trolling through bars, tempts people to engage in criminal conduct, and locks them up for unconscionable periods of time when they fall for the scheme."

Source: <https://www.courthousenews.com/reverse-sting-inspires-withering-dissent-in-9th/>

Most objectionable is the bill's pandering to vigilantism. The encouragement to report suspected criminal activity combined with hotlines and web-based reporting turns neighbor against neighbor. Many states have identified vigilantism as a threat, rather than a benefit to legitimate police work. The problem is that these groups are not trained in law enforcement, and can overstep the bounds of appropriate policing behavior and commit due process violations or entrapment. By encouraging vigilantism, this bill is sending the completely wrong message.

Consider for a moment: If sting operations are really so effective at uncovering criminal intent, then why have we not used this tool to uncover police impropriety? The public has expressed a tremendous concern about potential racism in law enforcement. Would you consider passing a bill that would utilize deception in order to uncover racist language or behavior from them?

There is no budget yet attached to this bill, though I expect it will be a considerable sum. The US spends billions on punishment and incarceration, yet mere millions on prevention. Directing that funding into education, treatment, and prevention would result in reducing harm to our children, rather than filling our prisons. Treatment must encourage people to use it, which means it must be free of the fear of prosecution.

In order to prevent child sexual abuse, we must train parents, teachers, neighbors and friends to learn the warning signs; we must provide open communication for a child to report inappropriate behavior; and we must also counsel children who might become perpetrators of the potential consequences of their actions.